

HARRISBURG'S MOST COMPLETE GUIDE TO NIGHTLIFE, NIGHTS & ENTERTAINMENT

December 2014

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MAGAZINE

GAME ON
Exploring Wild
Game Cuisine
(sorry, Rudolph)



PLUS:

Paint Nite brings
fine art to the bar

AND:

Warm up with
Hot Water Music
frontman Chuck Ragan



The Fine Art of Drinking

Bars in Central Pa. now offer a unique way to satisfy your creative urges from the comfort of your barstool

I can't say that I've ever confidently held a paint brush in my hand. I was more of a finger-paint kind of guy back in elementary school – the good old days when we'd don Dad's retired dress shirts as makeshift art class smocks and, no matter how indecipherable the mess of colors we schlepped together, the creation would inevitably earn a spot on the refrigerator door. Creativity came easier then.

These days, the adult version of me is far more comfortable observing art than actually making it. I have friends that are full-time artists, and let's just say that their artwork looks better on my apartment's walls than anything I'd be able to create.

But maybe I've been selling myself short. Maybe there's a little Henri Matisse or Pablo Picasso inside me I've just never tapped. Maybe I do know how to paint more than just my brother's kitchen.

These thoughts quickly started swirling in my mind when I came across a little thing called Paint Nite – a Bob Ross-esque guided painting session, held within the familiar confines of a bar. Though the concept certainly piqued my interest, I couldn't get past my fear of completely sucking at it. But really, what did I have to lose? If nothing else, there was a bar that I could drown my uncreative sorrows at. So I signed up, optimistic that miracles are, in fact, possible.

Anxiety can be a heck of a thing. And while it may be a crippling, agoraphobia-inducing feeling for some, it can be, on the contrary, a prerequisite for experiencing something awesome and unexpected. And in the case of Paint Nite, it's this apprehension – spiced up with a few adult beverages – that serves as the breeding ground for creative freedom.

As far as the social painting industry is concerned, Paint Nite is king. The brainchild of admittedly unartistic entrepreneurs Sean McGrail and Dan Hermann (McGrail concedes he was "third best at a non-art school," while Hermann ran a laundry and delivery business he started in college), Paint Nite was originally intended to make fine art more accessible to the general public. At present, Paint Nite is licensed in 95 U.S. metro areas, 10 cities in Canada and reaches as far as Sydney, Australia; Johannesburg, South Africa; and Buenos Aires, Argentina.

"A lot of people are curious about the arts, but you often have to sign up for a night class or commit to college-level class," says McGrail. "It's intimidating. There's a lot of judgment around fine arts."

McGrail and Hermann established Paint Nite in 2012 as a way to get away from the "good art versus bad art" debate and instead focus on the creative process as a thing anyone could have fun doing. As McGrail puts it, he wanted "everybody to get a gold star."

"I think people generally want to be creative, but they might not have the time, or they might not know exactly how to do it themselves," explains Jennifer Hull. Not only did Hull lead the Paint Nite that I attended at Federal Taphouse in Harrisburg last month, but she, too, is the licensee for the Central PA region. "We try not to promote it as a class; you're not going to get a whole lot of art instruction. It's more of a party."

Of course, there's no more tried-and-true way of injecting a little fun into an activity than with a stiff drink or two. Hence Paint Nite's tagline: "Drink Creatively."

In Hull's estimation, that is the most important part. "We want them to set aside their fears when they're at Paint Nite," she says. "For two hours, you're just going to relax and enjoy yourself, sip on a cocktail, have a glass of wine and just do something fun."

Entering the upstairs portion of Federal Taphouse, it was immediately clear that this was a stress-free zone. A room typically used for live music, here it was laid out with table after table dressed in lime green tablecloths and adorned with paper plates doubling as paint palettes and an army of blank canvases. On the stage stood two easels – one bearing a completed example of the piece we would be painting (a Van Gogh-inspired composition titled "Starry Night Harrisburg"), and the other holding a blank canvas.

Hull and her team greeted us at the door to check us in and offer some basic instruction. First order of business? Grab an apron and find a seat. Second order of business? The bar.

A glass of Cabernet and a bottle of Stone IPA in hand for my wife and I, respectively, we took our seats and made small talk with those around us. A mother-daughter duo to our right chatted anxiously about how long it's been since they last held a paint brush. Across the table, a 20-something girl advised her friend against drinking the water in the red solo cup at each station. ("I did that the first time I came to one of these," she quipped. "Never again. It's for rinsing your brush.")

Soon, Hull brought the room to order from the stage, her voice amplified thanks to a headset microphone reminiscent of the bygone days of the Backstreet Boys and *NSYNC.

"Before we get started, I need everyone to

raise your drink in the air," Hull began. "Now, put your other hand on your canvas, and repeat after me." What followed was The Oath – a tongue-in-cheek declaration that there will be no whining, complaining or quitting and that we will, at all costs, have fun.

Next thing you know, we're dipping the largest of our three brushes (Hull calls it the "Daddy" brush) into our mound of yellow paint and without hesitation, we begin painting. From there, Hull employs a step-by-step instruction method, using the blank canvas on the stage to demonstrate. One point that's made clear, however, is that the participant has complete control over what goes into their composition.

"Some people are very comfortable with their own sense of imagination and they want to do their own thing. They just go for it," says Hull. "Other people say, 'Nope, I'm doing everything you say and am just going along with you.' I don't know if you saw, but someone put the Batman symbol up in the moon last night. How cool was that?"

Two hours and one "drying break" (read: opportunity to refuel at the bar) later, the array of blank white canvases that had first filled the room were a sea of blues, yellows and oranges, each a slightly different take on the model painting, each uniquely original to the hand that crafted it.

The way McGrail sees it, the Paint Nite process serves more than merely providing a fun-filled and stress-free means for a participant to paint.

"I think by experiencing it firsthand, and likewise seeing how difficult it is, it gives them a better appreciation for how difficult it is to move a liquid across a canvas and create an image," says McGrail.

Paint Nite, although arguably the largest and most rapidly growing player in the social painting game, is not alone in bringing the live art experience to the bar scene. And as more and more paint nights continue to pop up across the globe (see the sidebar below for other options here in Central PA), it can only be assumed that the cultural divide between the perceived stuffiness of Fine Art and the common man becomes less and less.

But perhaps it goes deeper than that. Perhaps this is the shot in the arm that the ailing world of art sales and gallery visits needs – a chance to rekindle the romance humanity once had for original artwork.

Then again, it might just be face-value after all – an evening with a beer, glass of wine or martini in one hand and a paint brush in the other. Which, all in all, isn't such a bad thing.

In recent years, Central PA has seen an uptick in the world of social painting, as more and more artists and bars continue to join up in an effort to make fine art more accessible – and fun. Here's a rundown of where to find a class near you:

Paint Nite

Classes held throughout the month at various bars in Harrisburg, York, Carlisle, Gettysburg and, soon, Lancaster.

This month: Various classes
paintnite.com

aMuse Uncorked

Although classes are held primarily in and around Harrisburg, aMuse Uncorked also offers traveling painting parties.

This month: Various classes
amuseuncorked.com

Crafts & Draughts

At present, Crafts & Draughts (pronounced, "drafts") is hosted monthly at Federal Taphouse in Lancaster, but we're told additional venues are in the works.

This month: December 18,
Federal Taphouse (Lancaster)
craftsanddraughts.com

Creative Art Events

York-based artist Holly Davis hosts paint nights around York County.

This month: December 8,
The Cove (York)
creativeartevents.com

Paint Spot @ The Pub

Lancaster's Annex 24 Gallery teams up with fellow downtown business Characters Pub.

This month: December 8,
Characters Pub (Lancaster)
annex24gallery.com